

BOOK REVIEWS

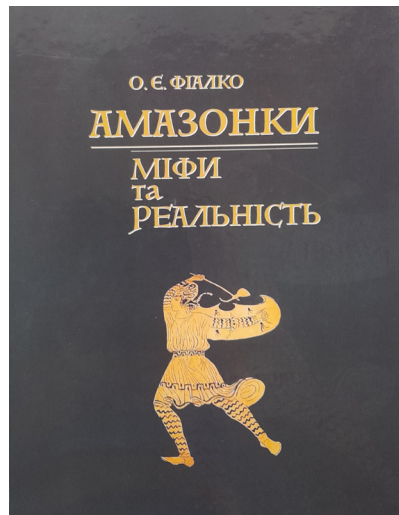
Archaeologia Polona, vol. 62: 2024, 339–348
PL ISSN 0066-5924
DOI:10.23858/APa62.2024.3676

Olena Fialko, *Amazons: Myths and Reality*, 2023. Kyiv: Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 434 p., ill. [in Ukrainian: Олена Фіалко, *Амазонки: міф або реальність*, Київ: Інститут археології Національної академії наук України, 2023, 434 с., іл.], ISBN 978-617-7810-35-2

Reviewed by Evelina Kravchenko^a

The Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine has published Olena Fialko's book *Amazons: Myths and Reality*. Actually, it is a publication of the author's thesis for the degree of Doctor of Historical Sciences, which she successfully defended in 2020 at the Institute in Kyiv.

The scientific significance of the paper work and its relevance are difficult to overestimate, as it brings together all the available sources that mention or point to the existence of the Amazons. The author emphasises the existence of women warriors in Scythian times as a systemic phenomenon that was not so common in earlier times, although there are some cases of evidence of the existence of female soldiers in the past history of mankind. This is primarily due to the specifics and basic economic and social characteristics of societies that crossed the threshold of the Iron Age. This was a time of intensification of land movements when the speed and distance of military campaigns increased significantly due to the emergence of horsemanship and the appearance of nomadism. As the author of the dissertation



^a Reviewed by Evelina Kravchenko, Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Science of Ukraine, Kyiv; 12 Volodymyr Ivasiuk Av., 04210 Kyiv, Ukraine, e-mail: evekravchenko@gmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0001-7238-7417

notes in the introduction, the long absence of men who took part in long-distance campaigns could give rise to such a phenomenon as female warriors. This phenomenon is cited as a legend by ancient authors – Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, and others – when fragments of ancient legends about the lands of the Cimmerian Bosphorus and Meotis are recited. The existence of this phenomenon in various European peoples throughout the Iron Age, where under different conditions, a woman could acquire the qualities of a warrior, only confirms the existence of this phenomenon.

The long debate about the mythical Amazons and the legitimacy of the use of this term is far from complete, but the classic philosophers are unanimous in their thesis about the development of the culture of the ancient Greeks and their life in the mythical horizon. That is, from the point of view of the Greeks, the mythical Amazons were so close, intertwined by scholastics with real historical events, that the transfer of meaning to real peoples took place among the contemporaries of those events, so the question of legitimacy was not discussed by most philosophers. Such a thorough historiography also allows us to continue to cover this issue at the actual level.

This issue has become particularly important in recent decades, when in the world's leading democracies women are finally gaining equal rights alongside men in their professional pursuits, including in the military. Our culture undoubtedly stands on the foundations of ancient Greek culture, the values of which were revealed to the world of the Amazons. But was this phenomenon unique to Greek culture, or is it part of human civilisation but insufficiently studied, and therefore more legendary, mythical than historical reality? How could it happen that a completely powerless ancient Greek woman created a separate society, and Greek society accepted it? All these issues are covered by the book reviewed here.

The structure of the book generally reflects the structure of the thesis defended by the author. The paper is built on the classical scientific principle with coverage of history of previous research and then the author's research methods. Following this chapter, the sources and their analysis are presented in separate parts, and the last chapters are historical, where the Amazons are characterised as a historical phenomenon.

The book's introduction "The state of study of the question" includes the discussion of terminology and the main research fields concerning the outlined range of issues. It is worth noting that this book is referring to a Greek society and worldview. Therefore, it is worth substantiating the opinion on the basis of the conclusions of philologists and philosophers-classics, especially Friedrich Nietzsche and Aleksandr Nemirovsky; the work of Martin Heidegger is also worth mentioning. If the author insists on the need for argumentation in Russian-language texts and the formation of a mental image in the Russian-speaking environment, then it is worth paying attention to the work of psychology by Piotr Yakovlevich Halperin, as well as studies of Russian linguists.

Chapter 1 (Part 1), “Literary Tradition of the Amazons”, contains an analysis of ancient mythology and data from ancient authors. Among others, O. Fialko cites the data of Herodotus (but the episode of this author’s journey to Scythia should be supported by a reference to the source because this issue is the subject of discussion).

It is also worth mentioning the Central European cults of Orsilokha and the goddess with serpent legs (Rankenfrau in German archaeology), which were also known to the Scythian tribes that lived in the Ukrainian forest steppe. These women’s cults, very similar to the ancient cult of Artemis, with the spread to the territory of Scythia, were to receive both their sacred places and the priestesses who protected them. The spread of military cults in the Iron Age could have had an effect on the female cults of warriors, common in all European tribes from the Greek south to the Varangian north.

In general, it can be deduced from ancient mythology that it tells of a certain phenomenon of Greek society, which arose so far back in time that it became the content of the hymns and epos of the Aedes in the Greek Archaic period, which was explained by scholars of Classical period according to the historical science of their own period, which is ultimately reduced to Ephesus and the temple there of Artemis. All this became the foundation for the image of the Amazon in ancient Greek society.

Chapter 2, “Amazons in the Fine Arts”, has a thorough analysis of all artistic representations and objects depicting women warriors. It is also worth noting that the author, describing all the findings of ancient images of the Amazons, did not map them, which, in our view, is a serious fault. After all, even when describing the findings, it is clear that in some places, they must form compact groups. It is also worth noting that the theme of the Amazon is very popular in the Cimmerian Bosphorus, vases using this motif were probably made there. Images of Amazons on Etruscan objects should also have been grouped together.

Chapter 3 (Part 2), “Amazons of the European Scythia in Archaeological Sources”, is the largest in the dissertation and contains an analysis of archaeological complexes that may be associated with the Amazons. Perhaps it would have been worthwhile to single out the descriptions of the complexes and present them in the appendix and to dedicate the section to the generalisation and systematisation of this group of sources. In this way, the text would be better perceived by the reader. In the manner in which it is presented, the text on “Religious buildings” is not very clear, it is difficult to understand which ones the author interprets as belonging to the Amazons or whether they did not actually use any of them.

In the part describing the burials of girls and children with weapons, the author does not provide an argument for their belonging to the phenomenon of women warriors. This really significant phenomenon in the history of human societies should be singled out for a separate analysis.

In the paragraph on “Funerary items”, the items are partly defined by gender, which, in our opinion, is an unfortunate term (woman’s items/men’s items). Maybe the author should think about a different wording (items which are traditionally associated with women/men?).

The following three chapters are more synthetic and interpretive: “Scythian Amazons – direct participants in military conflicts” (Chapter 5), “Issues of social differentiation and chronology” (Chapter 6) and “Amazons as a general historical phenomenon” (Chapter 7). All three chapters are undeniably innovative in the archaeological research of women’s burials in European Scythia. Anthropological research has provided a lot of information, but it is worth carefully checking the publication information with reporting information. The collective burial in the Sary-Kaya mound field near Bilogors`k in Crimea belonged to one family. Most of the buried men had multiple cut wounds that healed during their lives; unhealed wounds were recorded only on female skulls). It is important remark, which connects with sources interpretation, but it is not predetermine the conclusions of research.

Chapter 6 should have been supplemented by at least three maps according the date of burial: second half of the 7th–6th centuries BC, 5th–first half of the 4th centuries BC and the second half of the 4th–3rd (2nd) centuries BC, on the maps the graves of the nobility and socially differentiated burials should also be marked.

In general, the dissertation reflects all available sources for the study of the phenomenon of women warriors of European Scythia, that is the Amazons. The Early Iron Age is a time when the basic worldviews of European civilisation were formed; they are the main ones of European nations to this day. Therefore, the image of the Amazons of the ancient Greeks became synonymous with women warriors. Whether the notions of war and militancy can be considered synonymous in this context is an open question and is not the subject of this work. After all, a woman warrior is first and foremost a defender as opposed to a male warrior, who can also be an aggressor. The Conclusions succinctly present the main results of the research.

The book is supplemented by meaningful appendices, including a complete register of burials of Amazons of European Scythia (302 burials), the characteristics of burial mounds and burial structures, funeral items, graves and their construction, anthropological characteristics, chronology, site associations, etc. The book is well illustrated (241 figures).

In spite of our aforesaid remarks, O. Fialko’s book *Amazons: Myths and Reality* is a new research project carried out at a high professional level. The publication of this research is undoubtedly a significant event in the archaeology of the Eurasian Iron Age and will determine the direction of further research in this field for many years. Remarks do not reduce the scientific significance of this work, but on the contrary, open new themes for future research.